

Fort Indiantown Gap to permit appreciation of a rare butterfly

July 1, 2004 | Patriot-News, The (Harrisburg, PA) | From staff reports | Page B01

Coming soon: a chance to see a rare butterfly in a place where most members of the public are banned.

Pennsylvania's only population of regal fritillary butterflies will be on display this summer when the Pennsylvania National Guard permits walks in normally restricted areas of the military base.

National Guard biologist Joe Hovis described the butterflies as "monarchs dipped in chocolate." Regal fritillaries are disappearing east of the Mississippi River because their food source, violets and butterfly milkweed, are vanishing.

The butterflies flourish at the Gap because those two plants thrive there. The reason those plants do well is the tank maneuvers and shelling pound down other vegetation, Hovis said.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Regal fritillary butterfly observation walk. WHEN: 3-6 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday, and 4-7 p.m. July 13. WHERE: Fort Indiantown Gap. INFORMATION: To sign up for the walks or for more information, call 861-2949.

NOTE: The Regals are notably strong fliers.

Even so the butterflies needed help cruising through the hot air from the politicians and the paths of tracked vehicles. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shared the North American Butterfly Association's view of the threat to the Regal Fritillary colony. It was the threat of a lawsuit in federal court by the law firm of Debevoise & Plimpton that changed everything.

Don't let the Gap tour guides tell you otherwise.

Rare butterflies find home on the range

September 12, 2004 | Patriot-News, The (Harrisburg, PA) | AL WINN; Of Our Lebanon Bureau | Page A14

This is the place, on a few grassy fields in the northern Lebanon County hills, where the Eastern regal fritillary butterfly is making its last stand.

The butterflies depend on the good will of the Pennsylvania National Guard and the efforts of The Nature Conservancy, a national environmental group, to maintain their limited habitat. As far as anyone knows, they exist nowhere else.

On a summer day, they appear to be holding their own. Butterflies with the regals' characteristic bright orange wings with chocolate brown borders can be seen flitting about the butterfly milkweed plants on a Gap field.

It hasn't been that long since regals like these, an Eastern subspecies of the more common regal fritillaries of the Plains, were much more widespread.

As recently as the 1980s, regals had been spotted near Gettysburg and in Chester County.

But in those places and others along the East Coast, the last populations of the regals were, as The Nature Conservancy's Betty Ferster put it, "winking out."

Regal fritillaries thrive in grasslands and have survived in Pennsylvania for thousands of years, moving from place to place as clearings created by lightning or humans have appeared, then disappearing as woodlands once again encroached.

But in the last few decades, remaining grasslands disappeared under homes, businesses and farms.

However, at Fort **Indiantown** Gap, a military base since the early 1930s, the land lay undeveloped but had enough activity to keep it from reverting to woodland.

A study by the conservancy in 1992 estimated about 2,000 regal fritillaries at the Gap. Ferster said there are now 1,000 to 1,200, a number she said has been stable since the conservancy established a full-time office here in January 1998.

In August 1999, the Guard set aside 157 acres for the butterflies. In 2002, that was increased to 220 acres.

The butterflies remain in a precarious position risking the possibility that a single disaster could wipe them out in one swipe.

Long-range plans call for reintroducing the butterflies in other areas, possibly at Gettysburg National Military Park. But the conservancy isn't rushing.

"You can't just release the butterflies in any big open field," said Pat McIlhenny, the Nature Conservancy's land supervisor at the Gap. Trying to figure out what kind of field will support the regals is one of the conservancy's tasks.

Some things are clear. Regal caterpillars need violets -- arrowleaf violets at the Gap. The adult butterflies need a variety of nectar plants, including the milkweed. There are a number of fields at the Gap, beyond the officially protected area, that would seem to fill the bill, but Ferster said the butterflies don't go there.

In the meantime, military training is banned on the land set aside for the butterflies. Some disturbance in the area might be OK, Ferster said, but too much would destroy the regals. "We don't know how much too much is," she said.

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INFOBOX:

A CLOSER LOOK

Other projects at the Gap: *Bird survey and monitoring: Studies the effects of training using a database of species, abundance and diversity. *Snake monitoring and management: Studies amphibians' breeding, including timber rattlesnakes, copperheads, turtles and swamp-dwelling salamanders.

*Insect inventory, monitoring and management project: Studies insect links in the ecosystem as food sources, pollinators and disease carriers.

*Airport wildlife hazard control project: Manages hazards to flight facilities.

*Macroinvertebrate surveys:

Collects data on aquatic insects, water quality and habitat.

*Stream water quality and groundwater mapping: Monitors stream flow and sediment where Manada Creek and **Indiantown** Run leave the base.